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CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Walrond

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

Confession and Absolution.

FIVE SERMONS.

BY

FRANCIS F. WALROND, M.A.

VICAR OF RUSTHALL.

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THESE Sermons, preached in the month of August, 1877, in the church of St. Paul's, Rusthall, are published at the request of some of those who heard them. The first four are reproduced from memory, aided by the scantiest memoranda. The fifth is taken from the notes of a shorthand writer.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

I.

GENERAL CONFESSION.

PSALM CXXXIX. 1.

"O Lord, Thou hast searched me, and known me."

SUCH was the Psalmist's sudden cry when he found himself in the presence of the LORD. It is well that we know nothing of the circumstances in which this Psalm came to be written; for if we knew anything of them we might be tempted to look in them for an explanation of the awful sense of a besetting GOD, of which it is the expression. But unless we find this explanation in ourselves we shall not find it at all. The great events of our spiritual history are not, as a rule, very closely connected with the marked incidents of our outward life; and it is in the spirit within, when human voices are hushed, that man meets his GOD. Amid the multitude of the

thoughts which the Psalmist had in his heart, a moment came when he was made to feel that he was face to face with One who knew those thoughts better than he knew them himself, who was tracking their secret windings, and understood them "long before." He became conscious of a gaze which penetrated the inmost recesses of his being, and from which no secrets could be hid. It was like light flashing into eyes accustomed to darkness, like the grasp of a hand laid suddenly upon the shoulder of one who fancied himself alone. "O LORD, Thou hast been searching me out, Thou knowest me." In the secret places of his soul he had met the eye of GOD, and the fear and the wonder of finding Him there startled and surprised him. The mask dropped from him, and he stood revealed and ashamed. The daily incidents of his outward life, the words which were passing from his lips, the thoughts, motives, hopes, fears, which had seemed to be hidden in his heart, all were naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom he had to do. "Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. There is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O LORD, Thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me." The

world had vanished and he was alone with God.

If he could but escape! If he could but hide himself! Yet would he, if he could? The Light was awful, but to hide from it now would be death, to fly from it would be to fly from life. Where could he hide? If there were a secret place in the universe where GOD is not, could that utter darkness ever be a home for the spirit of man? "Whither shall I go from Thy SPIRIT? Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?" A Spirit had laid hold of his spirit. A Hand had grasped him which would not let him go. The High and Lofty One who inhabiteth Eternity was making His creature feel that He is determined to bless, and that life is in His presence alone.

Trembling at the mystery of GOD, he began soon to tremble at the mystery of himself. The light which shewed him the one made him for the first time conscious of the other. And the consciousness bowed him to the dust with a still deeper awe. He had looked within and met the Eye of GOD; now he looked within and caught a glimpse of himself. That fearful and wonderful maze of opposite impulses and conflicting motives, that strange medley of hopes and fears, and joys and sorrows, that busy multitude of thoughts which

now, in that new light, were "accusing or else excusing one another" within him, the mystery of his own being, passed all his understanding; he was helpless to cope with it or comprehend it. How awful the Eye which could discern the whole! How glorious the Wisdom which was at the root of all! There was One to whom all this was as an open book, who understood him thoroughly, who was spending upon him "thoughts more in number than the sand;" waking or sleeping He was always with him, an awful ever-present Friend.

A Friend, yes, how could he doubt it? Who but a Friend could know him so well? No thought now of hiding or of flight. The fear which had filled his heart is already cast out. He has been drawn so close to GOD that he has begun to trust Him; he rejoices to feel himself in His grasp, to be able to repose in His strength. And presently we find him taking up with both hands the heavy burden of himself, and casting it, with infinite relief, upon the Rock of Ages. The deceitfulness of his heart, the strange contradiction of his thoughts, the bewildering perplexity of his life, he spreads it all, of his own free will, before the eye of Him who alone can understand it, and asks Him to look into it and unravel the tangle. "Search me, O GOD,

and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. Look well if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

We have here, my brethren, a type and model of a general confession. There is no mention of any special sin; there is no one particular transgression burdening the Psalmist's soul; but there is a sense of a life which is missing its aim, of an infirmity of will which is ever trembling upon the verge of sin, a shrinking from the All-seeing Eye which arises from a conscious want of inner harmony with God; there is more than a suspicion that the secrets of the heart, if dragged to light, would be found to contain some "way of wickedness" which the heart itself would be ashamed to recognise. And then there is the determination that the secrets of the heart *shall* be dragged to light, the deliberate laying bare of the inner life before the eye of God, the acquiescence of the will in the fact that He reads the heart, not merely as submission to a necessity which cannot be avoided, but as the glad acceptance of the one only hope of a higher life, a conscious bringing out, as it were, one by one, of the thoughts and intents, that they may be tried by His light and tested thoroughly. There is the prayer that He

will make His search complete, that He will thoroughly scatter the darkness, and leave no corner of the soul unvisited, that He will take into His own hand the guidance of the life, and lead the perplexed and bewildered spirit in the way everlasting.

True Confession, then, is no mere acknowledgment that we have sinned. It has no necessary reference to wrong actions, or wrong words, or even wrong thoughts, distinctly remembered and burdening the conscience. It is a strong effort of the will turning the spirit round to face the light of God; it is a determination that there shall be no longer any secrets between the soul and its Maker; it is a throwing open of the whole heart that the eye of God may search it through and through. The voice of the Lord God is calling to every one of us, Where art thou? and true confession is the answer of the soul, Behold, here am I. Habitual confession to God is, in other words, habitual walking in the light. It is the very foundation of a manly and a Christian character. It alone can give truth in the inward parts, and impart the free and royal spirit of one who has nothing to hide. Those who can remember the first making of such a confession mark that period as an epoch in their lives, but, whether or not its first beginning is

within the reach of memory, it is certain that no human soul has ever attained its full stature without the habitual practice of it. The want of it dwarfs and stunts the growth, and drags the whole life downwards. Daily to bring forth the soul and bathe it in the light of God, to say plainly, and to mean what we say, "I know not what I am, I am certain that I am worse than I know, I am a perplexity to myself, but Thou, Lord, knowest Thy servant, do with me what Thou wilt, only leave me not alone in the darkness;" he who is doing this is standing upon a Rock which nothing can shake. He is so close to God he knows Him, or rather is known of Him, so well, that he forgets what it is to be afraid of men. He has placed himself unreservedly in the hands of the only wise Physician, and the fresh life-giving air of Eternity is entering into him. He is daily losing himself, and daily finding God; distrusting himself daily more and more, and trusting more and more in a Righteousness which encompasses him, and which claims him for its own. For this is "the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile."

II.

THE CONFESSION OF PARTICULAR SINS.

PSALM XXXII. 5.

"*I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.*"

WE learned last Sunday from the hundred and thirty-ninth Psalm, what is the meaning of confession in its general and fundamental nature. We saw how one who had been shrinking from the eye of GOD was made to feel that his only true life lay in meeting that eye and submitting with the full assent of the will to its gaze. True confession we found to be the opening of the heart before GOD, in the one desire that He may see and search the whole, and that no secret may be hid from Him, the making the soul absolutely transparent to His gaze, without an excuse or covering to hide our shame. It is clear that this is by no means the same thing as the confession of particular sins, and that the one can never take the place of the other. Never-

theless, their nature is the same. We have only to apply to particular cases the principle which we have learned by reflecting upon confession in general.

Let this principle be our guide in the confusion which surrounds us. Let it keep us silent and thoughtful amid the strife of tongues in which we live. Wherever we go we are in the midst of very hasty and positive assertions, very strong expressions of opinion, very harsh condemnations of those who take an opposite view. And just now all this turns upon one subject. Confession and Absolution are perpetually the topic of conversation at social meetings, they fill the columns of newspapers, and occupy the pages of reviews. At such a time it is well to be silent, and ask ourselves first of all very solemnly, not to whom we should confess, but what confession itself is; not the manner in which Absolution may be obtained, but what it is that the sin-sick soul requires for its health, and what Absolution means. Remember always that one action done from the pure desire to do His will will teach us more of God and of His ways, one earnest honest look within will teach us more of ourselves and what we need, than days and nights spent in discussing the words of Scripture or the doctrines of religion.

Now, as regards confession, I believe I may take for granted that nearly all of those whom I am addressing are in the habit of saying that confession is a matter between ourselves and GOD, and that it is to Him that we must confess our sins. Certainly. Are you then doing it? Are you in the habit of opening your heart to GOD, and asking Him to search into its secrets? When your conscience accuses you of some thought or word or deed, of which you are, or ought to be, ashamed, do you as a matter of course treat it as a thing in which GOD is concerned; do you at once speak to Him of it, lay bare its hideousness in His light, and tell Him plainly in His presence that you loathe it? Rather than add our voices to the shout of execration which condemns our brother, rather than lift up our hands and eyes in pious horror at the shocking revelations which have lately been made of the Confessional, it would surely be well to cast a searching look within, and ask what we ourselves are doing. Possibly if we were to do this we might, some of us, find that the chief difference between ourselves and those whom we condemn most harshly is simply this, that while they are perhaps too ready to believe in the help which man can give, and to lay bare the secrets of their hearts to the priest, we are

not caring enough about our sins to ask either God or man to help us to get rid of them.

We may take it as a rule which has no exception, that those times when we seem to see most clearly that our brother is wrong, are exactly those in which our own hearts are most likely to be deceiving us, in the very same matter, with reference to ourselves. And therefore I cannot but feel it to be pre-eminently my duty, at such a time as this, to charge you to confess your sins to God. My brethren, I do not hesitate to express my belief that of the many things which ought to be done, and which are left undone, among us, there is not one which is more generally, more fatally, forgotten, than this very practice of confession of our sins to God, which we are so perpetually pronouncing to be necessary. The omission of it is lowering the standard of the whole Christian life, and paralysing Christian energy and effort. It is numbing and deadening the lives of thousands even of those who are saying the General Confession every week or every day, and saying it honestly.

"We have left undone the things which we ought to have done. We have done the things which we ought not to have done." To say this, and to say it honestly, is very far better than nothing. One who is doing so must be

nearer the Kingdom of Heaven than one who makes no confession at all. But it is a cheap and easy thing to do. It brings no shame, it gives no pain, it leaves no sting behind it, it involves but little sense of the awfulness of the Allseeing Eye. Yet how many of us are content, not merely in public and family prayers, but in our individual confession, to use only such general terms as these!

In the thirty-second Psalm we have an instance of particular confession of a particular sin. Its tone is wholly different from that general confession to which I drew your attention last Sunday. In this which we are now considering, the speaker has been oppressed by the consciousness of a distinct sin. It has weighed down the soul and burdened the conscience. It has hidden GOD from his eyes and turned the sunshine of his life into darkness. For a long time, he says, he kept silence. He may or may not have been joining in general confessions, but this particular action, which was distinctly in his mind, he refrained from confessing distinctly by itself. He let it remain where it was. He did not bring it out and shew it to GOD, call it by its name, and cast it away. So it was settling into himself, and would have turned his whole nature into its hateful likeness. But at last there came a

change. He said, not in a general way, but with reference to this particular action, not merely acknowledging that it was wrong, but realising its iniquity, "I have sinned against the LORD." He looked upon it now, not as part of himself, at home within him, but as a loathsome thing which had fastened itself upon him, which he repudiated and abhorred as much as he had once submitted to it. It was sin, and he said so. And the answer instantly came, "It is *not* part of thyself. It *is* an alien thing. It shall no longer drag thee down to death. The LORD hath put away thy sin." The Psalm is a song of gladness, a "shout of joy," for the relief which had come from a particular confession.

But, you say, the sin referred to here was a a grievous sin, one which might well be a burden upon the conscience and goad to a special confession. David had committed adultery and murder. Very shocking, no doubt; but considering the atmosphere in which he was brought up, considering the flatterers by whom he was surrounded, considering the ordinary habits of Oriental kings, is this single outburst of despotic self-will and cruelty so much more shocking than your daily peevishness, your daily irritability, your self-conceit, your love of your own way, your

laziness and self-indulgence, your indifference to high and noble things, your insincerity? Let us compare the two cases. David, in a sudden gust of temptation, was betrayed into a sin; it entangled him and he fell into another. An ordinary monarch on an Eastern throne would have thought very little of either or of both together. But the memory of it made him miserable. It was turning his life into a falsehood. It was perpetually staring him in the face, goading and tormenting him. At last he opened his heart to GOD. He confessed plainly to Him what he had done, and what he had made of himself. He prayed, not that he might be let off punishment, but that he might be washed, cleansed, purged, at all costs delivered from the pollution which had fastened on his life. And his sin was put away. His soul became transparent. There was truth in the inward parts, and there was given to him again "the princely heart" of one in whom is no guile. And *your* unkind, hasty word, spoken perhaps yesterday or last week, what has become of it? It gave pain to some one whom you loved, and presently it gave pain to you, for you were ashamed of it, and wished you could unsay it. The memory of it rose again and again, and accused you to yourself. It seemed to be a mocking con-

tradiction of any words of kindness or loving deeds which you afterwards said or did. Your conscience was troubled and you felt the trouble. But by degrees the trouble grew less and less. Other things had to be thought of, talked of, attended to, and at last you forgot the thing which you had done. What has become of it? You left it where it was. You don't remember it, but if any One can see your heart, He sees it settled there, a black spot of pollution. And one Eye does see it, and He will not endure the sight. You might have destroyed it, but you have only forgotten it; and there it remains, none the less abominable because you have ceased to think of it, none the less loathsome because you have ceased to loathe it. While this is so, do you wonder that God is a stranger in your heart, that you know so little of Him as an intimate Friend, that your intercourse with Him is, as it were, with a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry but for a night, that your prayers are distracted by wandering thoughts, and that the world unseen, when you think of it at all, seems to you to be but a homeless void? How could you expect to grow in intimacy with One from whom you have every day more to conceal? How can your intercourse with Him be free and confidential,

when you never appear before Him without feeling that there is something upon your mind which He hates and which you dare not shew Him? Is it likely that Eternity, in which He dwells, could seem to you otherwise than homeless, when you are carrying about with you undestroyed that which makes it impossible for you to enter into His rest? Oh, bring out the accursed thing from the darkness in which it is hiding, and slay it in His presence. Say to Him not merely, "I have done the things which I ought not to have done," but "Thus and thus I have done. I have done this deed, I have said this word, I have thought this thought, and it was a shameful, hateful thought, word, deed. It is mine, and I loathe myself for it. It is worse than I know. Do with me what Thou wilt; only wash me from this my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."

This continual laying aside of every weight, and of the sin which so easily besets us, is the secret of all real progress in the Christian life. The omission of it is, I believe, the main cause of the deadness, the dulness, the lukewarmness, the indifference, and the uncharitableness, which we see around us, and which we feel in ourselves. And yet this continual confession to God is the one duty which we are continually enforcing upon others when

they speak of confession to man. Oh, my brethren, let us be honest and enforce it upon ourselves. Let us live in the practice of it. Then, and not before, shall we be qualified to form a judgment, and express an opinion, upon the value of that confession to man which we so often pronounce to be unnecessary or injurious. Daily confession to GOD keeps continually open the door of communication between ourselves and Him. It enables us to breathe the air of Heaven, and it scatters away from us the poisonous vapours of evil. We catch something of the mind of GOD, and can look upon sin as He looks upon it. So learning to hate it as He hates it, and to cast it upon Him, we feel the power of it broken, and the burden passing away, and the stain washed out, and there follows the calm strong joy of him who could say: "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."

III.

CONFESSION TO MAN.

S. JAMES V. 16.

"*Confess your faults one to another.*"

OUR thoughts on the last two Sunday mornings have led us to the conclusion that true confession is, in its essential nature, an effort of the will by which the spirit turns to meet the eye of GOD, and makes itself transparent to His gaze. Such confession may be "general," that is to say, it may be an opening of the heart and laying it bare before the all-seeing Eye, and asking GOD to search out its secrets for us, to explain us to ourselves, and to lead us in the way everlasting. Or it may be "particular," that is, we may take some one transgression, with which our conscience is reproaching us, and shew it to God, laying bare before Him the secret motives and impulses which brought us to it, asking Him to be our judge, and to condemn it for us, to let it no longer hide Him from our eyes, but

to restore to us the full and free intercourse with Himself which it has been hindering.

A moment's thought will make it clear to us that, in this full and true sense of the word, Confession, whether general or particular, cannot possibly be made to man. The question is not whether it is wise or unwise; it is not in our power to practise it. We cannot put into words what no language can express; we cannot open the door of our hearts so that another human eye may see us through and through; we cannot, by any words of ours, so make clear our secret thoughts that another human being may be able to track their endless windings. Nor even when some special transgression is burdening the conscience, when some one thought, or word, or deed, is filling us with remorse, can we lay bare to another human eye what we cannot clearly see ourselves, the secret unnoticed impulses, the conflicting feelings, the complicated influence of circumstances, which have contributed to lead us from the right path, and which make it impossible for us, even in memory, to estimate with justice the blame which attaches to us. There is no one thought, word, or deed, of all our lives, of which we can give, even to ourselves, the full account. How much less can we give it to another! True confession

can only be made to One who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who needs no confession of ours to enable Him to know us better than before.

What then does S. James mean when he tells us in the text, "Confess your faults one to another." There are at least two distinct meanings which these words may be supposed to be intended to convey. He may be telling us to confess to one another the faults which we have committed against one another; and he may be telling us to confess to one another the faults which we have committed against GOD. Let us consider these two meanings separately. Of the faults which men commit against one another there are three distinct divisions, differing greatly in their importance and in the degree of their influence upon the Christian life. There are public offences, and by these I simply mean offences sufficiently well known in a neighbourhood to be a subject of ordinary conversation, and to be recognised by others as requiring an apology. These offences are open, going before to judgment, and of them I need not speak. There are social offences, which are less noticed by others, or perhaps hardly noticed at all, petty misunderstandings, unspoken grudges, envyings,

jealousies, shewn not in words but in tone and manner, unkind words, a readiness to take offence and a recklessness in giving it, which make the quick, "I beg your pardon," for some trifling liberty, or accidental omission of courtesy, a very straining out of a gnat to swallow a camel. And lastly there are domestic offences, where the liberty or rudeness has been much greater, but the apology has not been so prompt, the innumerable small discords which destroy the music of a household, and by their continual recurrence become so much a matter of course that they attract no separate notice. There are some persons who seem to think that the mere fact of their living under the same roof sets them free from those obligations of courtesy and forbearance, which they would never think of violating in their intercourse with strangers. All these things divide the spirits of men from one another, they hide us more and more apart in our separate selves, and check the circulation upon earth of the free fresh air and sunshine of heaven. And of these by far the most fatal are those which I have mentioned last. The atmosphere which we breathe in our home, the air which is around us all the day long, must if it is touched by the contagion of

evil, be more deadly in its influence upon us than the intermittent poison of external intercourse.

And what is the remedy for all this? What is to check the spread of the poison, and promptly restore from time to time the purity of the air we breathe. Simply this confession of our faults one to another which S. James recommends to us in the text. The omission of it makes transgressions abound, and stifles Christian love. It must needs be that offences come, but woe unto him who allows them to remain when he might destroy them by swift confession. We are continually sowing the seeds of evil. They appear to us so small that we hardly trouble ourselves to notice them, and we sleep and rise night and day, and the seed springs and grows up we know not how, and free confidence is checked, and heart becomes more and more a stranger to heart, and the reserve which separates us from one another increases. Let us confess our faults one to another. Let us quickly destroy the root of evil before it has had time to settle in the heart, and hinder the flow of love and sympathy. Just as the particular confession of sins to GOD is necessary for the removal of the barrier which is continually rising between our souls and Him, so the ready confession of

our faults one to another is necessary to keep free the channel of mutual respect and Christian love, and to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

But S. James does not merely tell us that such confessions should be made. He tells us in what spirit they ought to be received. It is not that one who has committed a fault is to humble himself before his brother, and that brother is to sit upon a throne and royally forgive, as if he were himself no partaker in the evil. The confession is to be made in order that we may "pray one for another." We are to remember that if our brother fell to-day, we ourselves fell yesterday, and may fall again to-morrow, and he and we together are to ask in humbleness of heart for help against our common enemy, and strengthen one another in the strength of Him who alone is strong. The principle which S. James is enforcing is surely this, that Christian people are to make common cause against that which is the enemy of all alike, and whether confessing a fault or receiving a confession are equally committing themselves and one another to Him who can destroy the works of the Devil. If my brother has committed a fault against me, it is not against me only that he has sinned, it is not I alone that he has injured;

he has injured himself, he has sinned against the Lord. He and I must kneél together before the Holy One, and pray Him to heal the wound and take away the sin.

And this brings us to the second meaning of the words of S. James. He can hardly have meant his counsel to apply only to the faults which we commit against one another. He must have meant it to include also those which we commit against GOD. He must have meant that in some cases it is well to confess our sins to man in order that we may be able to confess them to GOD. For never let us suppose that true confession is an easy matter. It is most commonly the despairing effort of the will, crushed by that sense of isolation which is the sense of sin, to bridge over the gulf which encompasses its solitude, and, by telling out its shame and laying down its sin, to find itself once more in harmony with GOD and His creatures. Perhaps no two human spirits ever passed by precisely the same track through that tremendous darkness. To some it seems to be given to look straight out of their solitude to the everlasting mercy, to commit themselves at once without reserve to their Redeemer, and receive at the same moment a welcome for themselves and a deliverance from the burden of their sin. But

with others it is very different. They are like men in a troubled dream, when one is half-awake, when nothing is clear and everything is terrible; they are haunted by the ghosts of the darkness; the terrors of the darkness compass them about; the conscience is perplexed, the intellect bewildered, the enfeebled will drawn hither and thither by conflicting forces; there is a deep conviction of sin, and bitter self-accusation; and yet, mingled with this, an all-pervading sense of a righteousness somewhere, which ought to be accessible, and is not; a hatred of sin, and a dread of it, and a longing to be free from its yoke, yet a shrinking from true freedom, and a longing to be "let alone;" a dread of God and a fearful looking for of judgment, which must confirm the judgment of conscience, yet a thirsting for Him, for who else can deliver from the sin of which that same conscience accuses? Right and wrong are hopelessly confounded together, and the spirit is entangled in a wilderness from which no escape is visible. Now it is quite true that the way of wisdom, in that awful solitude, would be to press at once, at any cost, through clouds and darkness, to the Eternal Throne, and lay bare before the Allseeing Eye the plague and burden of the heart. But this is often exactly what, at that moment, the

bewildered spirit cannot do. It is groping in darkness and cannot see light. Yet it is longing for the living God. Its cry is, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat." Surely there will be an answer to that cry. And if we are collectively the Body of Christ, and members in particular, is it strange that He should ordain that we, who are so closely bound to one another, should be channels of life to one another? It would be strange indeed if we were intended to be dependent on one another, and help one another in all lesser matters, and not in that which is the hardest task of all, the victory over sin; if we were not each of us to be a light to another's feet and a lantern to his paths. Is there any one here who is seeking after GOD and not finding Him, whose conscience is troubled and will not be at rest, who cannot attain to a sense of pardon and peace and freedom, who is starving for the Father's love, and cannot believe that it is his already? —then let that "human heart by which he lives" point him to a way in which help may be found. Is there any one who you think will understand you? any one who you think knows you, or might know you, well enough to comprehend your perplexity? any one so much wiser than yourself that he is likely to

be able to discern and trace the windings of your path? any one who will love you so wisely as to make allowance for your weakness, and to have no mercy on your sin? Go to him and open your grief; tell out to him, as well as you can, the weary tale; do not spare your pride, nor shrink from shame. And then let him take you by the hand, and kneel with you before the Father, and spread the tangled web before Him who alone can unravel it, "and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man, S. James tells us, availeth much, and "if two of you," said the LORD Himself, "shall agree upon earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven." How much more when the thing that they are asking is that one of them may be saved from sin. If there is a sight that GOD and CHRIST and the holy angels love to look on, it is that of two human souls strengthening one another in the struggle with sin, and helping one another to find their GOD.

You will have observed that I have not yet said a word upon the subject of what is called "sacerdotal confession," or confession to a priest, with a view to obtaining from him absolution. I have not referred to this because

I do not find it mentioned in the text, and because I am anxious to impress upon you what I believe to be the direct teaching of this passage, before I endeavour to apply it to any particular question of the moment. S. James does not tell us that the person to whom we confess our faults should be a priest; nay, some may be inclined to think that he purposely avoids doing so; for in the preceding verse he does allude to the "elders of the church," and advises that they should be sent for to pray over the sick in the name of the Lord, but now, when he speaks of confession, he changes his language, saying only "confess your faults one to another," implying in this way that our confession is to be made not necessarily to any one bearing office in the Church, but to that person whom the heart freely elects as its guide. It was more than a thousand years after this epistle was written, that the strange doctrine gained a hold over men's minds that the help which comes to the bewildered conscience must necessarily come from a priest. This meaning was then thrust into the words of S. James, and he was more than once or twice quoted as an authority in its support. But even then there were still distinct memories of an earlier and simpler view; for while confession to a priest was indeed enjoined as a

duty it was still declared that, by virtue of the love and faith which gives unity to the Body of CHRIST, every Christian man might be to his brother a priest to receive his confession and to minister absolution. My belief is that the confusion which exists in men's minds on the subject of confession does not arise from any doubt or difficulty regarding confession itself, but from an indistinct or mistaken conception of the meaning of that forgiveness of sins to which confession is intended to lead. This will be the subject of our thoughts next Sunday. Meanwhile, if you are surprised and alarmed at the teaching respecting confession which has lately become so prevalent, if you think, as you may most justly think, that there is a more excellent way, then let it be your care yourselves to walk in that more excellent way, and to prove its excellence, not by harsh condemnation of others, but by the victories which it enables you to gain over temptation and sin. Be sure of this, that no arguments of yours, however skilful, no quoting of texts, however clear and appropriate they may seem to be, will ever convince another that a practice is wrong, which he finds, or thinks he finds, to be a source of strength to his spirit, and a help in leading a holy life. If you think that you discern error in the practice of others, you

must meet it not by talking about it and crying out how deadly it is, but by shewing in your own lives what is the good and the right way.

We have learned to-day from S. James that there is a sense in which confession to man is a plain and unquestionable duty, and that there is another sense in which in some cases it may be a valuable and most substantial help. Be careful then to practise it when the duty is plain; be careful not to discourage it in others to whom it may be a help though it would be no help to you. If you have yourself committed a fault against another, be ready to say so plainly and without reserve; not merely to admit that you have your failings like other people, and that your conduct has not been always perfect, but to confess distinctly the particular fault which you have committed. Go to husband, wife, father, mother, brother, sister, and say plainly, "It is I that have been wrong. The sunshine of our household has been dimmed, and it was my doing. The free flow of confidence and affection has been checked, and it was my peevishness, my self-conceit, my selfishness that did it. It was because I was impatient of contradiction, because I loved my own way, because I was swift to speak, slow to hear, swift to wrath, because I was unreasonable

and unkind, that the evil thing had power to enter in and destroy the music of our life." This is that confession to man which you know to be a duty. Are you practising it? If not, beware how you venture to sit in judgment upon others who practise confession, or teach others to practise it, in a way which you believe to be mistaken. Be sure that, whether others are right or wrong, the beam which is in your eye makes it quite impossible for *you* at all events to see the matter clearly.

"Confess your faults one to another." So speaking the truth in love, you may grow up into Him in all things which is the Head, even CHRIST, strengthening one another, and forgiving one another, even as GOD for CHRIST'S sake forgave you.

IV.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.

S. MATTHEW IX. 6.

"That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house."

OUR task this morning is to ask ourselves what we mean by the words of the Creed, when we say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Whose sins are we speaking of?—the sins of the world, or of some persons chosen out of it, or of ourselves? If a line is to be drawn, where are we drawing it? Again, do we mean that we believe that sins are forgiven, or only that they may be forgiven? Lastly, what do we mean by forgiveness itself? Is it only the remission of punishment, as the language of many seems to imply, or is it something far better than this, as the cravings of the sin-burdened conscience seem to require? It is obvious that questions such as these must be clearly answered before we can commence the further inquiry, how far man

may be to man the dispenser of the forgiveness of GOD.

There is not, I think, any passage of Holy Scripture which is better calculated to give us a clear apprehension of what is meant by the forgiveness of sins than the narrative from which I have taken my text. We have in it not a discourse about forgiveness, but an instance of forgiveness itself. In word, and deed, and outward sign, we see forgiveness represented before us. We may fairly therefore expect to find an answer here to the questions which we are asking.

There has been brought to JESUS a sick man, lying on a bed. He is sick of the palsy; that is to say, he has, partially or completely, lost the command of his own limbs. He cannot do with his body the things that he would. The hand refuses to move, the foot refuses to walk, the leg will not sustain the body's weight. He is brought to JESUS, in the hope that he may be cured of his disease. But the words which welcome him are of a kind he little expected. There is no reference to his bodily ailment, no indication that it will be removed. The Physician has discerned a deeper disease, and He speaks directly to the spirit of the man. "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee." Unless we are to suppose

that JESUS spoke without any direct purpose at all, and that the words of cheer and forgiveness might with equal fitness have been addressed to any other sufferer who was brought to Him for relief, we must conclude that there was in this case a gloom resting upon the spirit, a despondency and sadness arising from the sense of an inner discord, a paralysis of the will which checked the springs of the spiritual life, and filled the soul with self-despair. And this was necessarily mingled with a sense of blame and self-condemnation. It was his own fault and he knew it. It was his own doing, but alas! no doing of his could cure it. Nor was it for this that his friends had brought him to the LORD. So much the more must he have started in wonder and awe at the words which proved not an acquaintance with his bodily ailment, but an acquaintance with himself, which threw a light into the secrets of his being, and shewed him to himself. "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee." He could only say in his heart, "O LORD, Thou hast searched me, and known me," and surrender himself utterly to Him who had so proved Himself to be his King and Lord.

What else occurred in his inner life we may gather from the narrative which follows. "Behold, certain of the scribes said within

themselves, This man blasphemeth." This was probably not the first time, and certainly it was not the last, that men have pronounced it a shocking thing to hear from human lips the forgiveness of sins. It was not the first time, and certainly not the last, that they have been in eager haste to condemn the speaker, without first troubling themselves to enquire what he meant. The explanation was quickly given, and proved that the forgiveness of sins had a very different meaning in His mind from what it had in theirs, a meaning as different as light from darkness, as heaven from hell, "That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith He to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house." And he arose, and departed to his house. Was this a mere "miracle," a work of wonder, a sign of power exhibited to prove a Divine commission? or was it, as the Saviour said it was, a pledge that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins? If it were so, we must conclude that there was a direct connection between the sign and the thing signified. We must believe that what happened to the body was a visible representation of what was happening to the spirit. The life and elasticity, the health and strength, which now pervaded the bodily frame,

had their exact counterpart in the new life which had been given to the inner man. Sin had no longer dominion; the will was no longer paralysed; hope had taken the place of despair; the sense of enmity with GOD had been exchanged for thankful confidence. The selfsame power which had visibly set the body free from its numbness and death had worked an unseen deliverance for the spirit.

This, then, had been the meaning of the words, Thy sins be forgiven thee. And when the Church, day after day, and week after week, puts into our mouths the article of the Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," she must surely mean us to express our faith that JESUS CHRIST is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever; that the Son of Man hath still power on earth to forgive sins; that He is still proclaiming liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, that there is something upon which our own faith may fasten itself, a word of healing and forgiveness addressed to every one of us.

But what is our own meaning when we say these words of the Creed? We *may* mean that we believe there is a future punishment in store for sinners in the world to come, that it is due to all, deserved by all, but that GOD has devised a way by which He is spared the

necessity of inflicting it upon all; that we believe that He will remit the punishment of some, and that this remission of punishment is the forgiveness of sins. We *may* mean this, and then no doubt we shall set ourselves in anxiety and suspense to discover how far we ourselves are affected by it, whether our sins are or are not yet forgiven in the mind of God, whether or not we are to suffer the punishment which is our due. But before we enter upon the weary search for something which may shew a difference between ourselves and our neighbour, and be an assurance of our own individual safety, it would be well to enquire how far such an assurance, if attained, could ever give rest to our souls, and how far such a conception of the forgiveness of sins is in accordance with what our Saviour tells us of the ways of God. The man sick of the palsy was restored to health before the eyes of the unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees in order that they might know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins. What was it that they saw?—a human body rescued from the thraldom of disease, a human being re-instated in the command of his own limbs, enabled to do the things that he would, to go where he would, with the freedom and elasticity of life. To say that this deliverance was

wrought before their eyes in order that they might know that the same Son of Man hath power to work a corresponding deliverance which their eyes could not see, that it was an outward sign of a spirit rescued from the thraldom of sin, of a will restored to the control of the thoughts and purposes, of an inner harmony and freshness given back to the soul,—to say this is but to express in words what had already been as distinctly shewn in deed ;—to say this is to preach a Gospel, to tell us what is the abiding purpose of GOD towards sinners and towards sin: and the word of the Lord becomes, as we might expect it to be, a word of healing and forgiveness addressed to every one of us. But to say that this was done that the Scribes and Pharisees might know that the Son of Man hath power to remit to some persons the infliction of a future punishment, is to destroy the connection between the sign and the thing signified, and to give to the narrative a meaning which is as perplexing to the intellect as it is bewildering to the conscience.

But, thank GOD, we need not so empty of their meaning the glorious words of the Creed of our childhood. He giveth more than either we desire or deserve, and the message of His mercy is far larger and fuller of blessing than

our miserable anticipations of it. He sent His Son to save His people from their sins. There is an accursed thing which has usurped dominion over every one of us; we hate it, yet we obey it; we loathe it, yet it fascinates us; it paralyses our will, binds our spirit in chains, darkens our heart, crushes out our life; we would do good, but it compels us to do evil; it sets us at war with ourselves, at war with one another, at enmity with God; it blights all hope, kills all trust; sometimes it numbs with indifference, at others it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder; it gives its sting to death. But "I believe in the forgiveness of sins;" I believe that there has been a voice from the highest Throne, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; I believe that God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, has once for all condemned sin in the flesh; that He has declared that He hates it with an irreconcilable hatred, that He will burn it up and destroy it with the unquenchable fire of His wrath; but for us who are its victims, us whom it oppresses with its accursed yoke, He has nothing but an everlasting love and an infinite pity; He has declared that our chains are broken, and He bids us rise out of the bondage of corruption

and enter into the glorious liberty of the children of GOD.

GOD'S forgiveness, my brethren, is not an expression of His mercy to individuals, but an utterance of His unchangeable purpose to destroy the works of the devil. We may call it Absolution, the loosing of a chain and the setting a captive free. We may call it Remission, the removing, the sending away, of a burden which oppresses us. We may call it Forgiveness, the proclaiming of peace and goodwill from One who we thought was our enemy, and against whom we have sinned. But, call it what we may, it means that our Redeemer is strong, that the commandment has gone forth to the oppressor, Let My people go that they may serve Me. If we use our awful power of choice to choose the darkness rather than the Light; if we are in love with our bonds, and answer our Deliverer with the answer of the Israelites, Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians, then, my brethren, it is not that His great forgiveness has become limited, or that He has faltered in His unchangeable purpose; it is only this, that we will not come to Him that we may have life.

V.

HUMAN ABSOLUTION.

REVELATION I. 5, 6.

"*Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto GOD and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*"

THIS is by no means the only passage of Holy Scripture in which some of the most characteristic titles of our Lord JESUS CHRIST are applied directly to Christian men. Over and over again in the Book of the Revelation the same terms are repeated and applied in the same way. The fact that Christian men have been made kings and priests to GOD was continually present to the mind of S. John, and was to him a continual cause of wonder and thankfulness. And S. Peter twice repeats with marked emphasis, "Ye are a holy priesthood," "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood." We have not the least indication that these words are used in any

sense which can be called figurative, and it is most necessary that we should ponder them carefully, particularly in times like the present, when we hear so much said upon what is described as sacerdotal pretension. For many of us, in their eagerness to prove that there neither is, nor can be, an order of priests in the Church of CHRIST, are indulging themselves every day in the use of language which implies, if it has any meaning at all, that there is not now upon the earth, in any true and literal sense of the word, any priesthood whatever. To do this is to empty the Scriptures of their meaning, and to inflict upon ourselves an infinite loss. But if there is, as we are so emphatically told, a priesthood upon the earth, its functions must be very closely connected with the great subject which is at present occupying our thoughts, the forgiveness of sins.

We saw last Sunday that our Blessed LORD, in giving health to the sick of the palsy, declared that He did so as an outward sign of the forgiveness of his sin. As health was visibly restored to the body, and order took the place of disorder, so, we were given to understand, the paralysed will was restored to its freedom, and health was given to the spirit.

But there was one point to which I did not

direct your attention last Sunday, and which we must consider to-day. It is this; that the LORD claims the power of forgiving sins for Himself, expressly under His title of *Son of Man.* It is as the Head and High Priest and Representative of mankind that He declares that He has power upon earth to forgive sins. And if, after this, we find that there is among men upon earth a community to which is given in Scripture the name of the Body of CHRIST; if the very strongest words which language can supply are used to express the unity of this body with its Head; if His most characteristic titles are transferred to it; if, among other expressions, He is said to have made its members kings and priests unto GOD and His Father; and if, among the functions of a priest, nay, his most characteristic function, is the breaking down of the barrier between GOD and His creatures, and the restoration of peace where before there was enmity; then surely we cannot but draw the inference not only that the Son of Man hath still power upon earth to forgive sins, but also that the Church, which is His Body, is the instrument through which He does so; an instrument, just as our own bodies are instruments of our own actions; an instrument, not in consequence of any power or authority in the Church herself, but because

the Son of Man dwells within her, the Life of her life, and the Light of her light.

Again; if the expression "the Body of CHRIST" is intended to convey to our minds any distinct meaning whatever, we surely must be intended to understand that its functions are not performed in disorder and confusion, but by a distinct organisation corresponding to that of the visible human body with which we are familiar. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? We are the Body of CHRIST and members in particular, each member performing his share of the functions of the whole, serving the whole, and, in his own sphere, representing the whole. We should therefore naturally expect that the Organisation of the Body of CHRIST should include an order of men whose especial function it should be to represent the Church in her priestly capacity, to be the mouthpiece and organ of the Body in absolving men from their chains, and declaring the forgiveness of sin. And such an order of men we find. When, therefore, you hear from human lips the words, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," as the sick of the palsy heard them from the human lips of GOD made man, you may well bow down with S. John in wonder and adoration because He hath

made you kings and priests unto GOD and His Father; but you need not put aside the message because it is wonderful, nor refuse the mercy because it moves you to adoration. For if to us the Ministers of the New Covenant is given the name of Priests to GOD, it is not because that name is exclusively ours; it is because the whole Body of CHRIST is a royal priesthood, and we are the organs of the whole, ministering continually in this very thing. Our office has no meaning whatever if it has not this meaning,—that we may say to every congregation of people to whom we speak, that we may say to every separate individual soul in that congregation: "GOD is your Friend and not your enemy. He has redeemed you. He has put a difference between you and your sin. He is at peace with you, and at endless war with it."

It is a glorious message to deliver. It is a royal position to be allowed to deliver it. But is this priestcraft? Does it puff up the priest with a sense of his own importance? Does it lay his fellow-men in the dust at his feet? Does it arm him with the terrors of the world to come, to degrade the intellect and crush the spirit, and hide GOD from the eyes of His creatures? Or is it what it professes to be, a power to give freedom, liberty, and light, to

scatter the darkness, to give peace to the conscience, and health to the palsied spirit? Oh, my brethren, believe me, when the priests of GOD realise the grandeur of their mission, when they feel themselves to be indeed the mouthpiece and instruments of the absolving power of the Son of Man, it is no moment of pride or self-exaltation. They are humbled to the dust at His presence, and bow their knees in uttermost self-abasement. To be GOD'S minister! To be commissioned to scatter His sunshine free and far through His world wherever human souls are sitting in darkness, to shed forth the refreshing rain of the waters of life wherever the soil is dry and hearts are athirst, to loose men from their bonds in His Name, and set the captive free; is this a mission which can foster pride and self-conceit? S. John's doxology is the only possible utterance of the heart: "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto GOD and His Father; to Him," and not to us, "be glory for ever and ever."

But the brightest sunshine casts the darkest shadow. Both you and we are continually tempted to count ourselves unworthy of our high calling, and to measure the thoughts of GOD by our own. Priestcraft is close to every

one of us, whether priest or layman, not because there are those around us who are teaching and practising what we call by this name, but because the thing itself is knocking at the door of our own hearts. Every day we are hearing from the lips of religious people language which seems to imply that when the Great High Priest said, "I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world," He said what was not true; that the Church of CHRIST, if it is His Body at all, is a lifeless corpse, for He is not living within it; that it is not a royal priesthood; that the priest is not a visible representative of One who is present though unseen, but an ambassador of One who is unseen because He is absent; that the Son of Man is not at this moment exercising upon earth His power to forgive sins. Every day we are hearing language which seems to imply that He did not come to save His people from their sins, but to release them from future punishment; that when He said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," He meant not, Thou art loosed from thy bonds, but Thou shalt not be called upon in the world to come, to pay the penalty which thy sins deserve. My brethren, when the minds of men have become accustomed to these two falsehoods, that the Son of Man is not present but absent, and that the

horror of great darkness which men have to dread is not sin itself, but the punishment which GOD inflicts for it, then the door is wide open for the worst forms of priestcraft to enter in and take possession. The glorious words "Thy sins be forgiven thee," have ceased to be a Gospel, an utterance of the mind of GOD and His everlasting purpose; they have dwindled down into a mere expression of favour to an individual. How can we win that favour for ourselves? How shall we know when we have attained it? How much penitence will suffice? Who will tell us whether our sins are forgiven in the mind of GOD? Whom are we to confess to? And what if some of our sins, from ignorance or forgetfulness, remain unconfessed? The poison enters into the heart of the layman, and the sin-sick soul, conscious of its slavery, bewildered by the mystery of sin, is ready and eager to welcome any voice which speaks of absolution, ready and eager to enter upon the impossible task of confessing itself to man, ready and eager to begin the dreadful effort of laying bare the secrets of the heart to an eye which never can see them, in the hope that GOD's ambassador may speak some word which may break the spell of fear. Or else you adopt a Protestant mode of doing what

is substantially the same thing. You search the letters of the Bible that you may find who they are to whom God shews favour. You study the pages of some author whom you trust, that he may teach you the marks of true conversion; you become your own confessor, and search anxiously in your own heart that you may find these marks; you seek after a sign that you are born again, and that you have nothing to do with the fate which awaits the ungodly. And the poison enters into the heart of the priest, and knowing surely that he is the representative of the Lord, but not remembering that he stands in the bright presence of that living Lord Himself, he cannot but enter upon the impossible task of endeavouring to act in His stead. How shall he discern whether the sinner is to be forgiven or no? how shall he venture to say whether the penalty is to be remitted? whether he has a right to speak of God's forgiveness? He has to act for One who searches the heart. He must approach as nearly as he can to the keenness of the all-seeing Eye. Question after question must be put, minute and ever more minute, that the secrets of the heart may be less entirely concealed, and the blind leader of the blind may be enabled to guess at his way.

You shrink from all this? Be it so. But be

in no haste to blame. Bring no railing accusation. If you don't believe in a living LORD, if you don't believe in the forgiveness of sins, the poison is in yourself; and *you* too, in your hour of gloom, will be ready to fly to any one who will profess to save you from the ghosts of the twilight; or else you will escape the danger of priestcraft by sinking into the more fatal slumber of indifference. We cannot, I believe, be too thankful that when those who are set over us in the LORD, the Bishops of this province, were dealing, in Convocation, with the book which has become so notorious in connexion with this subject, they did not think it their duty to condemn the book in itself; they did not echo the popular cry that the questions contained in it are shocking or prurient, or suggestive of evil; they declared plainly that the system of which the book is an example was the natural and necessary result of a certain false conception of the priestly office in its relation to the sinner; and on this false conception they had no mercy. They deliberately placed upon record their "strong condemnation of any doctrine or practice of confession which can be thought to render such a book necessary or expedient." They utterly reject and repudiate the teaching that the utterance of GOD'S message of for-

giveness is to be dependent upon the discretion and discernment of him who carries it. But while I rejoice that this condemnation was so distinctly expressed, I cannot but most solemnly, most earnestly, entreat you to consider whether the falsehood upon which that conception of the priestly office is based is not close to the heart of every one of us; whether the most decided Protestant is in any less danger of falling a prey to it than those whom he most habitually condemns. For the ultimate question is not one of High or Low Church, of Romanism or Anglicanism or Protestantism, but whether the Son of Man is, or is not, actually and personally present among us, loosing men from the bonds which bind them, and destroying the works of the devil.

In our own Prayer-book there are two forms of Confession, three forms of Absolution. Both these forms of Confession are general. With the first form of Absolution, that which occurs in the Morning and Evening Prayer, you are all familiar. I should be thankful if you were all equally familiar with the second, which is contained in the Office for the Administration of the Holy Communion. The third is in the Visitation of the Sick, and is probably familiar to none of you except those

who have made their Prayer-book their study. The use of the Office for the Visitation of the Sick is, according to the sixty-seventh Canon, optional with nearly all the Clergy, and probably, in the exact form in which it stands in the Prayer-book, it is seldom or never used as a whole. Also, in any case, the form of Absolution which occurs in it is only to be used if the sick person "humbly and heartily desire it." But whether the particular form of words be used or not, it stands in the Prayer-book as the distinct and solemn utterance of the mind of the Church, and of her message to her sick members; it is something which no priest has authority to refuse if he is asked for it. I am of course perfectly aware that there are many persons who wish to see this form of Absolution altered. They think that it breathes the spirit of priestcraft, that it puts the priest into the place of CHRIST, and arms him with an authority which does not belong to him. I am not one of them. I should be sorry to see the alteration of a syllable. I look upon this form of Absolution as a most decided protest against priestly assumption. It takes S. Peter's teaching that the Church is a "royal priesthood," it takes S. John's words that the Son of Man "hath made us kings and priests unto GOD and His

Father," and it simply applies the general truth to the particular occasion. So far from putting the priest in the place of CHRIST, to act in His stead, it puts him in the far more glorious though less proud position of being the simple mouthpiece of the present though unseen Absolver, and the organ of the utterance of the Church which is His Body. When the sick man is lying upon his bed of pain; when he is tortured, as men *are* tortured, with doubts, perplexities, fears; when he is haunted by a dread of GOD, because he feels he has laid himself open to His wrath; when the sins of the long-forgotten past are rising up before him, and binding him in the chains of despair; when he is straining his eyes in fear and trembling to look into the darkness before him; and when he humbly and heartily asks us for some word of absolution and release; then this is what we are commissioned to say to him, and forbidden to refuse if he asks it; "Our Lord JESUS CHRIST, Who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." I do not see how any form

of words could be devised which would more distinctly express the truth which we have been learning from Scripture, that the LORD JESUS CHRIST Himself is the one and only Absolver, that it is through His Body the Church that He pronounces His absolution, and that the priest who speaks such words as these does so not by virtue of any power or authority to act, at his own discretion, in the place of his LORD, but solely as the organ of the Church's utterance. And if I may not stand by the bedside of a sick man, and boldly deliver this same message; if, when the terrors of death compass him about, and the pains of hell get hold upon him, and he asks me whether I have a word from GOD to him or not, whether there is any power in heaven or earth that can save him, if I may not stand beside him in that hour of fear, and say, "My brother, the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, and by His authority committed to me I absolve thee; I tell thee that He is thy Friend and not thy enemy, that thy bonds are broken, thy chains are loosed, and that the door is open between thee and GOD most high;" if I may not say this, say it confidently, say it with authority, say it with direct reference to the particular sinner before me, then, brethren, it seems to me that I may as well be silent

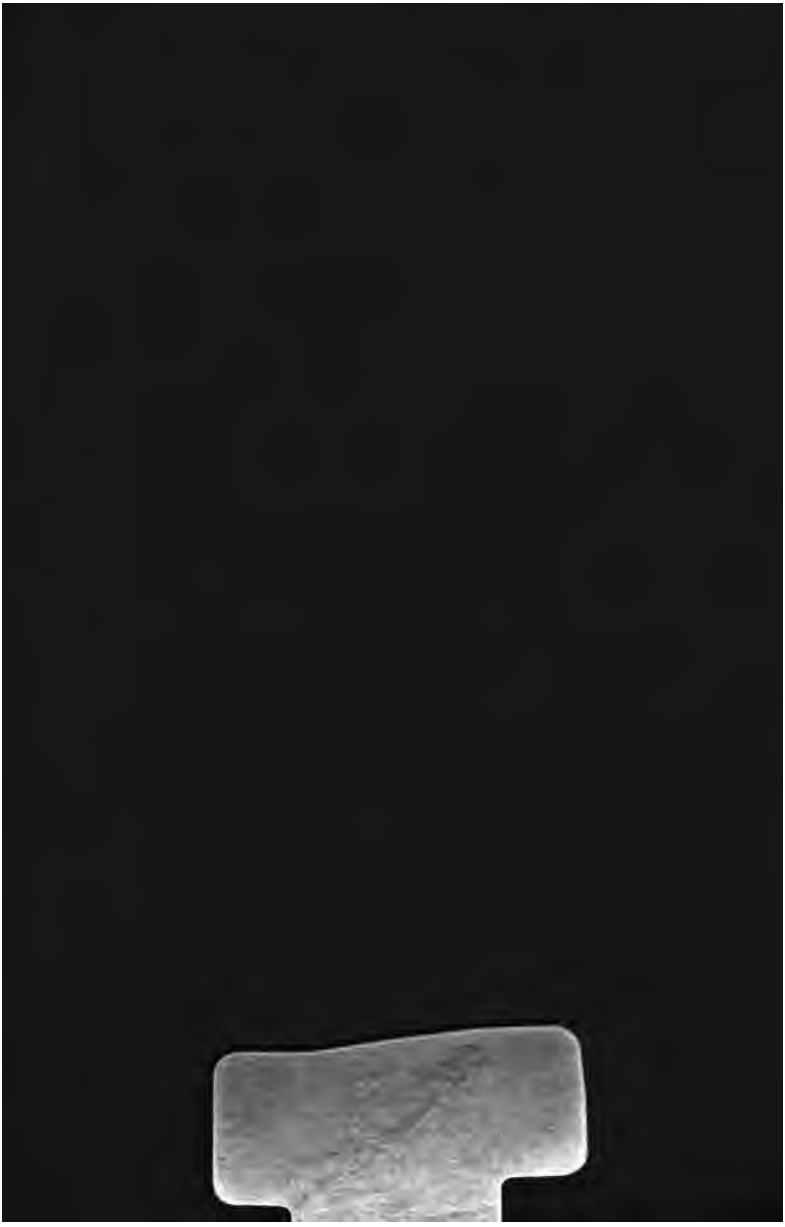
altogether, and not pretend to have any message from GOD at all. Whether the sin-sick soul will accept the offered healing; whether he will welcome the absolving word, or be as the sick of the palsy would have been if he had refused to believe that he could arise and walk, I know not and I need not know. I have spoken the truth, and it is the truth that maketh free.

But, finally, the question may possibly be asked, Why should there be any *forms* of Absolution? Why should we not be content with simply preaching the Gospel of repentance and remission of sins? Let us carefully bear in mind that we are speaking of matters which can be tested by experience, and tested adequately by nothing else. The forgiveness of sins is either a fact or not a fact. The use of certain means either does or does not help to bring that forgiveness home to individual men. A form of absolution either has or has not a special power to make men feel the presence of the absolving Saviour. If, as we have seen, the whole Body of CHRIST is a Royal Priesthood, and contains within itself an order of men specially set apart to represent it in this capacity, so that though they have, and can have, no exclusive claim to the title of priest, yet the priestly functions of the whole

are, as it were, gathered up, visibly represented and exercised by them; it is only consistent with this that there is also one official act in which the general message of forgiveness is expressed with especial distinctness and especial force, and in which the absolving power is gathered up and formally exercised. Short, concise, and significant in itself, it gives its meaning to every other action of the priest, and is a luminous point in which the light of the whole is distinctly seen. If you think that a sermon, or a conversation, or a statement of what you perhaps call "the scheme of salvation," will bring to the weary soul, bewildered and burdened with its sin, the same assurance of the presence of a Redeemer loosing its bonds and proclaiming peace, as an authoritative word spoken directly in His Name, exercising the very power for which the conscience craves, you must know very little of human nature, you must have looked very slightly into your own heart, you must have extremely little acquaintance with sick beds and bewildered consciences. As wisely might you say that, because the light and warmth of the sun are diffused all around us, there can be no special use of the lens by which the rays are collected to a focus, and brought to bear upon a particular point. As wisely

might you say that there ought to be in the Church no outward signs whatever of that which is inward and spiritual. It is quite possible that you may be unaware of any special blessing which the Absolution has brought to yourself. You may have heard the absolving word every day of your life, and not been absolved. But beware how you draw the conclusion that the defect is in it, and not in yourself. If you are sitting at ease, unburdened by a sense of sin, if you are not haunted by a high ideal of a nobler and better life, if you are not longing to attain to it and disappointed every day because you still fall so far short of it, and if then you go to church, and join in the Confession, and hear the word of forgiveness, and afterwards go away and say that you do not know what good the Absolution can do, then I deny your right to make your own shameful indifference the measure of the truth of God's commission to absolve. Ask those who have used the words of the Confession honestly, those who do feel that there is no health in them, who do long to lead a godly, righteous, and sober life, those to whom it is a matter of life and death to know that God is distinguishing between their sin and themselves; ask *them* whether they would miss anything if the Absolution were omitted,

whether the thought of the priest whose voice they hear is not completely forgotten in the deep sense of the heavenly presence of One who speaks through him, when, after Confession, they hear such words as these, "Almighty GOD, our Heavenly Father, have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life." It is as easy to say, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," as it is to say, "Arise and walk;" and we may be very sure that when he who had been sick of the palsy went home rejoicing, he was as fully conscious of the freedom given back to his spirit by the forgiveness of his sin, as of the health and strength restored to his body. I say advisedly, "the freedom given back to his spirit," for I by no means mean the pleasant sense of individual exemption from a future punishment; I mean the consciousness of the glorious liberty of the children of GOD, the liberty to do our Father's will, the liberty which arises from the assurance that He loves us too well to leave us in the slavery of sin, that He hates our sin too fiercely to allow it to have dominion over us.

Once more I repeat I should grieve to see one syllable altered in our forms of Absolution. I rejoice in them because of the comfort and

strength which they are daily bringing to individual souls; I rejoice in them still more because they are the abiding testimony of the English Church that the SON of MAN hath still power upon earth to forgive sins; they are her perpetual assertion that He hath made us kings and priests unto GOD and His FATHER, that the Church in every rite and ceremony, in prayer and praise and sacrament, is the outward and *effectual* sign of the close and living presence of the LORD, nothing in herself, and yet the fulness of HIM that filleth all in all.